

Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project
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David Sparr
Pianist, Music Director, Engineer, Boston, MA
Member, Boston Musicians' Association

Interviewee: David Sparr

Interviewers: Jay Rauch

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JAY RAUCH 00:00:18: Today is Friday, June 5 2020. I'm talking to David Sparr, a Boston based pianist—among other musical things. Do you think, to start off, you could tell me a little bit about what sort of gigs and musical work you were doing right before the [COVID-19] pandemic started?

DAVID SPARR 00:00:43: Sure. Well, like many musicians, I sort of cobble together a number of different aspects of—ways of making income in order to come up with a really—monetary compensation that supports a lifestyle. I could divide my—my stuff into maybe four parts. First of all, I have a part-time salaried position as music director at a synagogue in Brookline, Massachusetts, which involves doing things like choir direction and accompanying services, and basically keeping their whole audio systems running and up and running and working. That's one component. Second component is actually going out and playing gigs, concerts, recitals, things like that. The third aspect is I own a small recording studio, where I record other—other musicians' projects, original—original composers, and songwriters, and bands, and everything pretty much from classical to gospel and everything in between. Then the fourth component is—is sort of writing/arranging/composition stuff—stuff like that, and— and doing music transcriptions of—creating printed music for people to use. A lot of singers need stuff in weird keys, and that kind of thing. They need the chord changes fixed so that they're a little hipper. So

that's kind of the—the four components of what I was doing beforehand. Some of that—the percentage is—I'm still doing some of—some of those things. But the percentages have drastically changed in terms of what percentage of each of those makes up what I'm doing.

JAY 00:02:43: Can you talk about that some? How they've changed?

DAVID 00:02:45: Sure. Well, I'm fortunate in that my part-time side position still exists. It's a unique situation to—to this—these times, because the building of the synagogue that I work for is actually closed to the public. So there are no live—there's no live participation by congregation members. Actually, I had—it was a distinct possibility that I would be completely out of work; that they wouldn't want me. But in fact, what we're doing is we're doing a lot of—of live streaming broadcasting of services. I don't so much participate in playing and performing live on these—these video streaming. But what I do is I prepare music pieces, either just audio or sometimes audio with video, that they then plug into these into situate various situations, they can be instrumental, you know, where I have, we have an amateur congregational bands that can can system as many as nine players and—for instance, I created something where you can see all—all twelve of them across the across the screen playing to—recording actually in their home with their iPhones or tablets to a reference track that I previously recorded, and then I edit it all together so that it sounds like they're all—it sounds and looks like they're all playing together simultaneously, like a lot of people do. I'm sure everybody's seen those—those kinds of things. So that kind of thing, where sometimes it's just audio only where I'll send a track to—to a singer or whatever and it'll just be like a duet. But anyway, they're—they're keeping me somewhat busy and—and they're paying me so that's good. So that component still exists.

The studio—I still haven't had anybody come in. I'm still at the point where I'm not comfortable having people come in and perform in close quarters because it's not—it's not a huge space. People would be mixing their—their exhalations, inhalations, whatever, in my space. I still work in the studio, but I'm doing things like mixing projects that have either been previously recorded or doing things I can do—various things I can do by myself. The things like writing and arranging and transcriptions—that's not—that hasn't been affected that much, actually, because that's something that I always did on my own. Some of that I don't even have to go to the studio for. I can just work on a laptop at home, so that's—that's convenient, too. But the biggest hit would be the live performances. I think since March—the last—the last live gig I did before everything got shut down was, I think, something like March twelfth. Ironically, it was in an old age home. Kind of (*laughs*)—which is—sort of the highest risk place to be, but at that time, we didn't know. I survived, it seems.

JAY 00:05:49: So far, so good

DAVID 00:05:51: At least—at least I'm asymptomatic. I haven't been tested but my wife, who I am in pretty close quarters with, one could say, was—has tested recently, and she's—she's clean, so I probably am too. Anyway, so the only live thing I've done in terms of performance was I did a senior—a graduate

level recital at—for a master's vocalist doing master's—a master's degree, where I was quite a bit behind—the piano was quite a bit behind them. Because singing is—I imagine singing and flute playing are probably the most dangerous things to be in—be near in terms of the force of exhaling. You're probably a lot safer with a cello or something like that. But—But even like even other woodwinds are probably not as—not as dangerous as a flute, I would imagine. I'm just guessing, I'm not an expert. But—I haven't done a flute. But I did this—it was this one vocal recital that was videoed and it was actually they're—they had been waiting for months to do it and they finally said, “Look, I've just gotta—I want to get my degree.”

And I was willing to take the chance. We tried to be as careful as possible in terms of how we set up the geometry of the performance. But that's the only live thing I've done. That's—that's sort of the biggest contrast in terms of before and after. You can't rehearse, you can't have—you can't have choirs, obviously, you can't be in the same room with a bunch of other musicians.

JAY 00:07:49: You've mentioned the four—the four components that make up your—most of what you do. Have you been exploring, or do you know other musicians who are branching—trying to find new revenue streams during this time?

DAVID 00:08:07: Yeah, I think a lot of—first, a lot of people—I don't know if this is considered new revenue streams, but a lot of people—I don't do—I don't really teach, but many, many, if not the majority of musicians probably have some sort of teaching component as part of their—their repertoire of income. Almost all of them are doing remote teaching now. If they hadn't been doing it before they're—they're learning—learning whatever tech stuff they have to do to make that work. In my case, I'm actually—I'm actually—just bought Final Cut Pro, which is an apple, video editing—high end video editing software, because I don't really have a lot of experience with video. The video that I've done so far, for instance, for the synagogue—we have another guy there, who's—Jay, you know him—Josh Cohen, who's actually really good with tech stuff. I've just been sending him all the raw files and he puts the videos together. I do the audio mixing, but I'd like to be able to do some of that myself to take the load off of him because he's pretty busy and also just in terms of—for future—like you said, for future revenue stream kind of things, to be able to do video editing. I figure I have a lot of extra free time now to learn software. That's—for me that would be my new development.

JAY 00:09:43: Do you imagine that, if you're spending time learning software now, that's something that you would continue to use more coming out of the pandemic?

DAVID 00:09:50: Oh, yeah.

JAY 00:09:51: If, say, the other things come back to the way they were before—

DAVID 00:09:55: Yeah, I mean, video will always be with us, with or without a pandemic. And more and more—more and more—I'm thinking back, for instance, like when I played in—when I used to play in wedding bands as a primary source of income. Back in the day, you gave people an audio—a cassette of your demo. Now everybody wants—everybody wants to see a video. And I imagine that other kinds of—other kinds of—areas of music are like that too. People want to—want to see more and more—more and more visuals in their—in their consumer products.

JAY 00:10:31: Yup. You mentioned back in the day. Just to give me a sense of how you got to where you are, could you talk a little bit about your career trajectory?

DAVID 00:10:44: It's a little unusual in that nothing in my career has been planned. It's been a—a continual flow of random serendipitous events that led me to where I am. I didn't go to music school. I had no original intention of being a professional musician. I played piano as a kid, took lessons from the neighborhood teacher, that kind of thing. Never considered applying to—on a college level for music. I did a liberal arts kind of education. I played for fun on my own, not even in bands or anything, just listening to records, and just played. One day, it was raining and I couldn't do my house painting job and I was in the basement of a bar passing the time and just fooling around the piano. When I turned around, there was somebody sitting on the steps behind me and he said, "That sounds pretty good. You wanna join a band?"

And that's how I became a musician. Sort of everything since then has been a similar story. The recording studio thing was another situation where somebody said, "Hey, you've got a little four track cassette player there and the piano. I need to come over and make a recording."

I said, "Well, I don't really know how to do it, but you're welcome to try," and pretty soon I was buying equipment and became a recording studio. The synagogue job, same thing. Somebody said to me, "Hey, this guy needs—their company's just quit. You want to do it?"

And I said, "Wow, you mean I have to get up early on Saturday mornings and go to services?" I don't know if I want to do that, but I'll try it for a year. Twenty years later, I'm still there. So, it's kind of—everything—directing a choir—any—anything I've done, I've done by teaching myself without any kind of formal training and—writing arrangements—everything pretty much. I probably break all the rules (*laughs*). There're probably huge holes in my techniques, but—

JAY 00:12:47: I've heard your arrangements. They sound pretty great.

DAVID 00:12:50: Well, thank you.

JAY 00:12:54: You say your case is a little unusual. Do you come across other musicians, though, who have similar career paths?

DAVID 00:13:06: I'm sure there are. The thing is, I'm in Boston—the Boston area. There're so many music schools here, with the New England Conservatory, and Boston Conservatory, and Berklee College of Music, and then those music schools that are in the larger universities like at BU [Boston University], which you know about—and Harvard, and whatever. There's all these fantastic musicians that are—that start off young in this area, and many of them stay here. And they're all really highly trained. I often find that when I'm playing in an ensemble or working in studio with people or whatever, that they're, to a large extent, conservatory trained musicians or otherwise that had much more formal music education than I have had. But there are always people who learned on the street, you know. I'm not saying I'm unique. Back in the real back in the day, Duke Ellington probably didn't go to a music school, I'm pretty sure. The jazz musicians—Charlie Parker, whatever—they learned by doing, by playing with people that were better than they were. That's—maybe it's a good—maybe you could say a throwback in that sense, although I'm not putting myself in the category of Charlie Parker or Duke Ellington (*laughs*).

JAY 00:14:24: I'm curious, since you're in an area that has so many higher education institutions, do you—if you were recommending a career in music to musicians now, especially given the sorts of careers we're seeing, where people are wearing lots of different hats as musicians, what do you think about higher education versus the route that you took?

DAVID 00:14:50: I think it's great. I wish—in retrospect, I wish I had done it. Look—by teaching myself everything, I probably—I've probably come up with—I've probably come up with a composite product in myself that is probably different in some ways than if I had gone through the same training as everybody else. But I probably could have gotten to where I am a lot faster if I had had—if I had had a more organized way of learning. I think, for me, part of it was when I was younger I was pretty undisciplined about academic kind of stuff. So, maybe for me, I had to take a path that allowed me to take more time and work at my own pace. Now, it's not so much like that, now that it's—now that I'm older, I can focus on things that may excite me and then—and I can really go and learn them in an efficient way. But when I was twenty years old, I would rather party and play soccer and do anything else except go to the library and read a book or whatever, or sit for three hours and practice the piano. For me—my journey maybe worked for me, but—but I think that if anybody's really serious about music, and has the opportunity to—to avail themselves of the educational resources that are out there—and when I say—those educational resources go beyond just music schools. I mean, just take something like YouTube. If I wanted to learn something, I had to go out— Like a song—I had to go out and go to a record store and find it on a record somewhere—and find—and sit there and try to listen to it and write it out bar by bar. Now, there's YouTube and you can find almost any performance of any piece. And there's all these fantastic like, How to do this, How to do that, step by step kinds of things. Obviously, there's a lot of junk out there too [that] you have to weed through. But these resources didn't exist for me. So, between school and between all the digital resources online, I think up-and-coming musicians today have it made compared to what I had to go through.

JAY 00:14:54: Interesting. Did you, or are you, have you ever been part of a union?

DAVID 00:17:23: Oh, yeah, I still am. It doesn't really do much for me, per se, in terms of—if you're—if you're a symphony player, for instance, or work in an opera company, or whatever, those kind of musicians really benefit hugely from the union in terms of pension and health benefits and negotiations of contracts and stuff like that. Because I'm more of a contract worker, a gig worker who's basically self-employed except for my part-time synagogue gig, the union doesn't really do much for me in those respects. I do get my—my instrument and equipment insurance through them. But that's—I could probably—I'm sure I could find that elsewhere. That's not—that—having access to that insurance, isn't the reason that—the only reason—when I was younger, I did a few gigs that required me to be a union member. At this point, I could probably quit, but it's like it's more of—I stay in it more as a habit, as a way of keeping contact with people and keeping in the loop. I did a performance, a set of three performances of Leonard Bernstein's Mass back around 1990 or so with Sarah Caldwell and the Opera Company of Boston and I had to be a union member to do that. There—there were also—back in the 1980s, they had this thing—they may still have it—but there was something called the [Music] Performance Trust Fund, which was started when there was a recording strike in the 1940s.

JAY 00:19:01: The James Petrillo strike.

DAVID 00:19:04: Exactly. One of the negotiations they came out with because—in return for not using live bands on the radio and using recordings was that the record companies would kick in to a fund that would then hire musicians to go and play at—play in hospitals, and senior centers, and gazebos on a beach, or whatever public performances. And the compensation would come out of that fund. When I was a lot younger, I used to get a lot of those—a lot of those gigs playing, like in swing bands or whatever for people. But—but I haven't done one of those a long time.

JAY 00:19:43: I wonder if that fund is still around?

DAVID 00:19:45: I'm not sure. [At the time of recording, this fund did still exist]

JAY 00:19:52: Which—which union are you—

DAVID 00:19:54: Oh, the Musicians Union? It's—

JAY 00:19:57: The Boston chapter. [American Federation of Musicians - Boston Musicians' Association Local 9-535]

DAVID 00:20:01: Actually, the interesting thing is, the Boston chapter has two numbers. Say, like local [9-535] or something—I'm embarrassed I don't remember the actual number. But the reason why it has

two numbers is because there used to be two unions, one for Black musicians and one for white musicians.

JAY 00:20:18: Do you know which one—

DAVID 00:20:21: Well, now, like I said, they merged but they have—they kept both numbers so it'll be like five dash five three—like five was like the white union, and then the three number one was the Black union. Now of course it's one—it's been completely integrated but—but they kept—they kept both numbers so it's interesting, a bit of history.

JAY 00:20:42: That is. That's pretty funky. Have you heard things from the union at this time? Do you know if they're making any extra efforts to find ways to support musicians?

DAVID 00:20:57: The union is—one thing that they are doing is they're putting out a lot of information about how to get different kinds of unemployment. There's this specific pandemic unemployment which helps people that don't qualify for regular— To get regular unemployment, you have to work for someone who's kicking in money towards that fund. Now, even if I lost my synagogue job, I couldn't get unemployment for that because, as a synagogue, they don't—they aren't required to put in money into the unemployment fund. Churches and synagogues don't have to do it. So if I lost that job, I couldn't collect regular employment, but I could collect the pandemic—specific pandemic unemployment, which is actually kind of interesting because—because that fund—because right now, you make it—you put in a formula which comes up with how much money you would tend to make based on gigs you've lost or would have had, but then they kick in an extra \$600 bucks a week.

For many musicians, it's actually—the ironic thing is actually they're gonna get paid more for not working than if they worked because of that extra 600 bucks a week. For a lot of musicians that's—that plus whatever comes out the formula— they might make \$900— say \$900 a week in unemployment, which is more than they can make by working. So there's a little kind of catch-22 about—because if—any gigs you get, you have to, of course, report and if it goes—if you then—say you make \$400 bucks that week. That could kick you off that week's compensation of pandemic unemployment, but you would have made \$900 bucks. So you get sort of the ironic thing about, Well, do I turn down gigs or whatever—keep making employment?

JAY 00:22:49: That's a tough choice. This has been really helpful. I've enjoyed hearing what you have to say. One last thing: May I cite our interview in a paper for class?

DAVID 00:23:07: Oh, sure. Of course, do whatever you want with it.

JAY 00:23:08: I'll send you a separate release if the Center for Labor Studies has an interest in archiving it. But I'd love to reference what we've talked about just for class for now.

DAVID 00:23:22: What kind of headphones are those? I don't recognize them.

JAY 00:23:24: I'm gonna go ahead and pause our recording.

DAVID 00:23:27: Okay.